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Predictors of Abused Wives' Own Level of Violence

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Abstract

Spouse abuse has emerged as an extensive social issue. Although many studies have examined characteristics of abused wives, there has been a dearth of literature examining the relationship between victim and perpetrator levels of aggression. The purpose of this study was to explore those variables that are related to female victims' own level of aggression toward spouses. Demographic variables, personality variables, and wives' ratings of husbands' level of aggression were used to predict wives' rates of aggression. A demographic questionnaire, five scales of the 16PF, and the Conflict Tactics Scale were administered to 108 battered women. The results indicated that the sample and their spouses engaged in more acts of verbal and physical aggression than does the normal population. The sample also scored deviantly on all five personality variables. Wives' age and husbands' level of reasoning and verbal aggression predicted wives' level of verbal aggression. Husbands' level of physical aggression was the best predictor of wives' level of physical aggression.

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Predictors of Abused Wives' Own Level of Aggression

Spouse abuse has emerged as an extensive social issue. The results of a nationwide survey of 2,000 representative households indicated that approximately 28% of couples in the United States had experienced at least one violent episode, and 16% did so each year. Contrary to common opinion, men and women exhibited nearly equal rates of both victimization and perpetration of violence (Straus, 1977).

Despite the prevalence of spouse abuse, the problem was ignored until the late 1960's. Many events at that time, not the least of which was the women's movement, attracted attention to the issue of marital violence. Studies began to be published in the 1970's (e.g., Gelles, 1974; Walker, 1976) that provided descriptive accounts of domestic violence, that offered theoretical explanations of spouse abuse, and that investigated the personality characteristics of abused women.

Theoretical explanations for spouse abuse have included the feminist perspective, a stress-resource model, and social learning theory. Feminist writers, for example, have attributed spouse abuse to unequal role relationships between the sexes (Martin, 1976). Stress-resource theory describes marital aggression as an attempt to deal with stress when other resources are lacking (Goode, 1971). Social learning theory (Kempe, 1962) attributes aggression to the effects of role modeling and direct experience with violence.

Several empirical investigations of marital aggression have focused on the personality of the abused wives. The majority of these studies have treated abused women as a homogeneous group. For instance, no studies have differentiated between aggressive and non-aggressive victims of spouse abuse. This may account for some of the contradictory findings that have been reported with regard to the characteristics of abused women. Hartik (1978), for example, found battered women lower on ego strength than non-battered women, while Star (1978) found them higher on ego strength than a control group. Whereas Graff (1979) found abused women to be social and dominant, Rosenbaum and O'Leary (1980) found them to be unassertive and submissive. Moreover, no empirical research has been conducted to explore the relationship between victim and perpetrator levels of aggression. Although physical aggression may reduce stress for the perpetrator, it increases the victims' level of stress. The stress-resource model (Goode, 1971) predicts that a direct relationship exists between the level of violence inflicted upon an individual and that victim's potential for physical aggression. Hence, if the abused wife's other coping strategies prove unsuccessful, she also may resort to violence to reduce the stress of being abused.

The purpose of this study was to explore those variables that are related to female victims' own levels of aggression. Demographic and personality characteristics, as well as their husbands' level of aggression (as reported by wives) were used to predict the womens' rates of aggression. This approach extends previous research in that a) it includes demographic variables in the analysis, b) it measures personality characteristics of the identified victim, and c) it assesses spouses' level of aggression toward each other.

Method

Subjects

The sample consisted of 108 battered women recruited from local shelters, the local county attorney's office, and a marital violence treatment program who volunteered to participate in the research project. To be admitted to these programs women must have reported that they have been beaten by their spouses. The mean age of the women was 28.14 years and they were married an average of 5.45 years. Fifty-six percent of the women completed high school and eighty-five percent of the sample was caucasian.

Measures

Three instruments were administered to each subject for the purpose of collecting demographic information, personality style data, and information about self and spouse's use of conflict resolution styles. A demographic form was used to determine subjects' age, length of time married to partner, educational status, and ethnic background.

Personality was assessed by using five scales of the 16PF (Institute for Personality and Ability Testing, IPAT, 1979): Ego Strength, Humble-Assertive, Superego Strength, Tough versus Tenderminded, and Unperturbed versus Apprehensive. These five scales were selected either because they had been used in previous research and had produced contradictory findings or because of their face validity. Ego Strength was included because it has been used often in research in the area of spouse abuse. Hartik (1978), for example, found that battered women scored lower on Ego Strength and Star (1978) found that battered women

scored higher on the Ego Strength scale than did non-battered women. The Apprehensiveness scale was chosen because Hartik (1978) found that battered women scored higher on it than did non-battered women and Star (1978) found no differences. The Humble-Assertive scale, sometimes referred to as the submissiveness-dominance dimension, was chosen because of its ability to identify individuals who tend to commit anti-social acts. The Tough versus Tenderminded scale was included because of its ability to discriminate between independent and dependent individuals. On the surface these personality characteristics all appear related to victimization and perpetration of aggression.

The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS, Straus, 1979) was designed to measure the use of reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical aggression between spouses. The Reasoning Scale is composed of items that describe an intellectual approach to conflict resolution, including the use of rational discussion, argument, and reasoning. The Verbal Aggression Scale includes items that describe the use of verbal and non-verbal acts that symbolically hurt the other. The Physical Aggression scale contains items that describe the use of physical force against another person. The items in each scale are behavioral descriptions of acts of reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical aggression. Subjects indicate how many times during the past year both they and their spouse engage in each act in an attempt to resolve conflict between themselves.

Data Analysis

To determine the predictors of wives' level of aggression, two multiple regressions were used with the demographic variables, husbands'

scores on the CTS as reported by wives, and scores on the 16PF as the predictor variables and wives' scores on the verbal and physical aggression scales of the CTS as the criterion variables. The predictor variables were entered in a hierarchical fashion with the demographic variables entered first, husbands' scores on the CTS entered second, and scores on the 16 PF entered last. Demographic variables were entered first because they are innate to the situation. The husbands' scores on the CTS were entered next because they are situational variables. Personality variables were entered last in order to determine whether after taking into account innate and situational variables, there is anything about the wives' personality styles that predict aggression (Cohen & Cohen, 1975).

Results

Normative Data

The mean and standard deviations for the variables measured with an interval scale are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 Here

To determine whether the personality and aggression variables were in the normal range, the scores on these variables were compared to published norms. With regard to scores on the 16PF scales, the distribution of scores derived from the norming of the instrument was used (IPAT, 1979). However, because the mean of the present sample was used, it was necessary to compare it to the distribution of sample means, rather than to the distribution of individual scores. Both distributions have the same mean; however, the variance of the former is σ^2/N, which can be estimated by

s^2/N, where s^2 is the unbiased estimator of σ^2 (Hays, 1981). Furthermore, the distribution of sample means is asymptotically normal (Central Limit Theorem; Hays, 1981). Therefore, the obtained mean score was compared to a normal distribution with the mean equal to that found in the normative sample and variance equal to the variance found in the normative sample divided by 108, the size of the sample in the present study.

Using this strategy the sample of women exceeded 95% of the population on the Humble-Assertive scale in the direction of dominance. They scored in the one percentile range on all of the other scales used; that is, they were low on the Superego scale, Toughminded on the Tough versus Tenderminded scale, Unperturbed on the Unperturbed versus Apprehensive scale, and low on the Ego Strength scale.

Unfortunately, use of a similar strategy with the CTS was precluded because the means and the standard deviations of the normative sample are unpublished. However, when the obtained means were compared to the percentile distributions for the CTS, it was found that the women reported engaging in more verbally aggressive acts toward husbands than 57% of the population. The women also exceeded 95% of the female population in rates of physical aggression toward mates. The womens' reported rate of using reasoning skills to resolve conflict with mates exceeded 65% of the normative population. Based upon the wives' report, husbands' exceeded only 25% of the male population in rates of reasoning. With regard to verbal and physical aggression, wives rated husbands more aggressive than 97% and 99% of the normative male population, respectively. Moreover, wives rated husbands as more aggressive than themselves in rates of both verbal

and physical aggression. It should be noted that because the variance of the distribution of sample means is less than the variance of the distribution of the norming sample (by a factor of 1/108), these estimates are dramatically conservative; that is, they underestimate the percentile ranks above 50%, which included verbal and physical aggression by wives and husbands.

Multiple Regressions

The correlations between the criterion and the predictor variables are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 Here

The results of the hierarchical regressions are presented in Table 3. With regard to the wives' level of verbal aggression, both demographics and wives' rating of husbands' rate of aggression, as sets, were significant predictors. To examine the saliency of variables within these two sets, a variation of Fishers' protected t procedure was used (Cohen & Cohen, 1975).

Insert Table 3 here

According to this procedure, variables within a significant set are examined by testing the standardized partial regression coefficients (beta weights) within each set. These tests are found in Table 4. Age was the only

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Insert Table 4 Here

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variable within demographics that achieved significance. Reasoning and Verbal Aggression as reported by wives were the variables within the set of husbands' rate of aggression that achieved significance.

With regard to the wives' level of physical aggression, husbands' rate of aggression as reported by wives was the only set that reached significance (see Table 3). Again using the protected t procedure, physical aggression was the only variable within this set that reached significance, as shown in Table 5.

Insert Table 5 Here

Based upon this analysis, the best predictors of wives' level of verbal aggression toward husbands were wives' age and husbands' use of reasoning and verbal aggression as reported by wives. The only significant predictor of wives' level of physical aggression was husbands' rate of physical aggression toward wives. Aside from age, demographic and personality variables did not predict wives' level of verbal or physical aggression.

Discussion

Normative Data Analysis

The high rate of aggression reported by the wives has theoretical implications. The feminist perspective (Hilberman & Munson, 1977; Martin, 1976), which contends that women are taught to project a vulnerable image that contributes to their victimization, would not predict that abused wives would be verbally and physically aggressive. Instead the results of the present study support Straus' (1977) findings that both men and

women exhibit high rates of victimization and perpetration of violence.

The women reported engaging in less aggressive acts, verbal and physical, than did their husbands. This finding contradicts Straus' (1980) results that revealed nearly equal rates of aggression for men and women over a one year period. However, a methodological difference may account for this discrepancy. Whereas the results of the present study relied on wives' report exclusively, Straus obtained self-reported rates of violence from both men and women.

With regard to all five personality variables, the womens' scores deviated significantly from the mean of the established norms (IPAT, 1979). On the Ego Strength scale the women scored significantly below the mean. This implies that abused women tend to be emotionally less stable, easily upset, low in frustration tolerance, and easily annoyed. With regard to the Humble-Assertive dimension, the mean score of the sample was in the direction of assertiveness. As measured by the 16PF (IPAT, 1979) this is defined as assured, independent, hostile, extrapunitive, authoritarian, and disregarding of authority. These descriptors seems closer in definition to aggression than assertiveness and as such are consistent with the high rates of verbal and physical aggression reported in the present study. On the Superego scale the women also scored below average, implying that they are unsteady in purpose, lacking in effort for group undertakings and cultural demands, and likely to commit anti-social acts (IPAT, 1979). Given that physical aggression can be construed as an anti-social act, this finding is consistent with wives' scores on the CTS (Straus, 1979). On the Tough versus Tenderminded scale the women scored significantly in the toughminded direction, suggesting that they are resilient, down to

earth, independent, responsible, hard, unmoved, cynical, and smug (IPAT, 1979). Although we might expect battered women to become hard and cynical, it is surprising to find them describe themselves as independent. This may be a result of testing abused women who have taken action to stop violence by either seeking treatment or respite from the marital relationship. Finally, on the Unperturbed versus Apprehensive scale the wives' scored within the unperturbed realm, implying that they are unruffled, with unshakable nerve, mature, and may evoke antipathy and distrust from others (IPAT, 1979).

The results of the present study help to clarify the results of personality studies previously reported in the literature. The finding that the women scored below the mean on the Ego Strength scale, for example, supports Hartik's (1978) results and contradicts Star's (1978) results. Also, the finding that the women scored in the unperturbed direction of the Unperturbed versus Apprehensive scale contradicts Hartiks (1978) findings that battered women were more apprehensive than the mean and Star's (1978) findings that there were no differences. Both studies contained methodological flaws, however, that threaten their validity. They each utilized too small a sample size in relationship to the number of predictor variables. The present study utilized an adequate sample size and therefore more credence can be given to these results.

Based upon this analysis we cannot determine whether women with these personality characteristics tend to marry violent men or if these characteristics are the result of a violent relationship. Moreover, these results were obtained from a sample of battered women seeking

assistance from social service and criminal justice agencies. We cannot determine the generality of these findings to abused women who do not request public services.

Predictors of Wives' Levels of Aggression

It is apparent that husbands' level of aggression as reported by wives was the best predictor of wives' level of verbal and physical aggression. Although not every abused wife is aggressive, the probability that she is verbally and physically aggressive increases as the frequency and intensity of her husbands' level of aggression rises. This supports Straus' (1980) finding that both men and women use and escalate their use of aggression toward spouses.

With the present regression analysis it is not possible to determine who is the instigator of aggression. Although it cannot be determined if the women in the sample instigate violence or respond in self defense, the present study has shown that violence begets violence. This finding is consistent with research that shows that the negative behaviors of distressed couples are reciprocal (Margolin & Wampold, 1981) and that aversive behaviors within families are reciprocal (Patterson, 1975).

It is somewhat surprising that age predicted womens' rate of verbal aggression. Gelles (1974) and Straus (1977) previously documented that marital violence occurs across a wide range of demographic variables and there was little reason to expect that womens' rate of verbal aggression would be different. Based upon these results we cannot determine whether verbal aggression tends to decline with age or if the present societal and cultural norms approve of more verbal aggression by women than did the

preceding generation. Alternatively, the results may be an artifact of sampling error.

Interestingly, husbands' level of reasoning predicted wives' level of verbal aggression. The use of rational problem solving skills does not seem to prevent verbal aggression as would be expected; in fact it seems to increase it. Despite husbands' attempt to rationally resolve conflicts with spouses, wives' seem to engage in acts of verbal aggression toward their spouses. Perhaps, when the use of reasoning skills fail to end a discussion involving conflict, women escalate their behavior and engage in acts of verbal aggression toward mates. This is consistent with Patterson's (1975) finding that family members attempt to control other members' behavior and win arguments through the use of coercive means when non-coercive tactics fail.

Surprisingly, despite the deviant personality scores found for the sample, personality variables did not predict wives' level of either verbal or physical aggression. Compared to the normative population (IPAT, 1979) this sample can be described as a group of dominant, tough-minded, unperturbed women that have low levels of ego and superego strength. Yet none of these characteristics predicted wives' level of aggression. It appears that as a group these variables differentiate the sample of abused women from the normative population, but within the sample they do not differentiate among women reporting different levels of aggression.

Conclusions and Limitations

The results of the present study provide implications for the treatment of marital aggression. First, it appears necessary to involve

both spouses in treatment to bring about the cessation of physical aggression and to teach couples adequate skills to prevent the reoccurance of aggression. The focus of treatment would be on the clients' behavior in the context of a relationship and would offer both spouses the opportunity to learn more constructive ways to resolve conflicts. Second, the finding that husbands' level of reasoning, although below average, does in fact predict wives' level of verbal aggression is relevant to treatment. This implies that the use of rational problem solving skills by aggressive couples would not seem to prevent aggression. It is therefore recommended that therapy initially be directed toward teaching couples anger control skills and techniques to prevent the escalation of conflict and aggression. Only after these skills are learned, would treatment focus on improving reasoning skills, rational problem solving skills, and communication skills. Third, since it cannot be determined whether the deviant personality profiles obtained from the sample precede or result from victimization, it would be useful for counselors working with this population to assess personality after the physical aggression has stopped and couples are practicing new ways to cope with stress and interpersonal conflict. If at that time, marital partners appear deviant, therapies aimed at personality restructuring might be indicated, depending on the orientation of the counselor. However, it should be recalled that the results suggest that restructuring personality is unlikely to affect rates of aggression.

There are several methodological limitations to the present study. First, the results indicated that with regard to personality, the sample deviated from the normal population (IPAT, 1979). However, it cannot be determined whether women with deviant styles tend to marry violent men

or if the deviant characteristics result from victimization. Second, the results of the present investigation are based on the self-reports of women that have sought assistance from a social service or a criminal justice agency. In general, it cannot be determined the generalizability of these results to women who are abused but do not seek assistance. Specifically, it cannot be determined whether women who are abused and do not seek refuge or treatment are more or less verbally and physically aggressive or deviant with regard to personality than those that do seek refuge and treatment. On the other hand, with respect to rates of aggression, the fact that the present results are consistent with those based on a national survey (Straus, 1979) provides some justification to believe that the results are generalizable beyond the sample. Third, information regarding husbands' rates of reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical aggression was obtained from wives' reports. Thus, the validity of these ratings is unknown. Wives may have overestimated or underestimated husbands' use of specific behaviors to resolve conflict. Finally, many of the women completed the questionnaires within a few days after leaving home. It is possible that at that time they were in a state of crisis that led them to answer the questionnaires in an atypical manner. Likewise, it is not possible to determine the accuracy of the wives' reports of husbands' rates of reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical aggression.

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Table 1

Mean Scores on the Demographic Questionnaire, The CTS, and the 16PF

Variable	Score M	Score SD
Demographics		
Age	28.15	7.46
Number of Years Married	5.45	5.66
Wives' Conflict Tactics Scale Scores		
Verbal Reasoning	8.67	4.38
Verbal Aggression	14.98	8.14
Physical Agression	5.33	7.36
Husbands' Conflict Tactics Scales Scores, as Reported by Wives		
Verbal Reasoning	4.45	3.63
Verbal Aggression	25.35	8.52
Physical Aggression	22.54	13.73
Personality (16PF)		
Ego Strength	3.85	1.85
Humble-Assertive	5.47	1.86
Superego Strength	6.29	1.69
Tough versus Tenderminded	4.66	1.69
Unperturbed versus Apprehensive	6.00	1.94

Table 2

Correlations between the Criterion and the Predictor Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Age															
2. Years Married	.54														
3. Education	.14	.03													
4. Wives' Reasoning	.04	.08	.25												
5. Wives' V Aggression	-.27	-.07	-.08	.20											
6. Wives' P Aggression	-.18	-.07	-.05	.04	.62										
7. Husbands' Reasoning	-.13	-.03	.05	.45	.26	.05									
8. Husbands'V Aggression	.10	.15	.19	.30	.39	.26	.08								
9. Husbands' P Aggression	.09	.13	-.02	.29	.19	.33	.11	.52							
10. Ego Strength	.15	.14	.22	.04	.07	-.02	-.02	-.05	-.02						
11. Humble-Assertive	-.04	-.12	.21	.09	.18	.08	.08	-.13	-.02	-.08					
12. Suerego Strength	.21	.04	-.20	.13	-.02	-.07	.04	.06	.03	.03	-.08				
13. Tough vs Tenderminded	.05	.12	.18	.20	-.04	-.06	.08	.14	- 11	-.03	-.01	.06			
14. Apprehensive vs Unper	-.13	.01	-.04	.03	-.11	.00	-.04	-.18	.05	.00	-.01	-.02	-.09		
15. Ethnicity	-.13	.01	-.04	.03	-.11	.00	-.04	-.18	.05	.00	-.02	-.02	-.10	.04	

Note. V=Verbal, P=Physical, Unper=Unperturbed

Table 3

R^2 and Increase in R^2 for Wives' Rate of Verbal and Physical Aggression

Variable Set	Number of Variables in Set	Verbal Aggression		Physical Aggression	
		R^2	ΔR^2	R^2	ΔR^2
Demographic	4	.109	.109*	.034	.034
Husbands' scores on CTS as reported by Wives	3	.311	.202**	.169	.135**
Scores on 16 PF	5	.349	.038	.204	.035

Note. N = 108

* p< .05 ** <p .01

Table 4

Protected Tests of Beta Weights for Wives' Verbal Aggression

	Verbal Aggression
Variables	Beta
Demographics	
Age	-.353**
Years Living Together	.128
Education Level	-.044
Ethnicity	-.163
Conflict Tactics Scales	
Verbal Reasoning	.197*
Verbal Aggression	.428**
Physical Aggression	-.032

* $p < .05$ **$p < .01$

Table 5

Protected Tests of Beta Weights for

Wives' Physical Aggression

Variables	Beta
Conflict Tactics Sacles	
Verbal Reasoning	-.012
Verbal Aggression	.148
Physical Aggression	.275*

* $p < .05$